"TO THOSE OF A FEARFUL HEART
Isaiah 35:3-10
I John 4:13-18

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BETHANY PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
LAFAYETTE, INDIANA
JOHN M. BUCHANAN

The Old Testament Lesson this morning is one of those strange sounding passages that we associate with the Bible but really don't know how to handle ~~never take very seriously~~. The imagery is futuristic - utopian - "The eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped: then shall the lame man leap like a hart, and the tongue of the dumb shall sing with joy. . .Waters shall break forth in the wilderness...streams in the desert, the burning sand shall become a pool, and the thirsty ground springs of water."

Someone has suggested that our minds shift into neutral when we hear passages like that. We know the bible is full of them, but we haven't the slightest notion of what they mean. The imagery is strange, and besides they sound like the kind of promisory note, pie-in-the-sky religion that we have come to distrust.

Well, before we dismiss this passage it might be helpful to look a little closer and discover to whom it was written, and why it was written. The key is in the fourth verse: "Say to those of a fearful heart, 'Be strong, fear not! Behold your God'." That brings it a little closer to home: "to those of a fearful heart." That includes just about all of us, I would suggest. At some time or another most people ~~all of us~~ fall into that category. In any case the "fearful of heart" in Isaiah 35 refers to that part of Israel carried off into Babylonian exile. Captives in a foreign hand, cut off from their culture and relatives, the exiled Jews play a pivotal role in the developing faith of Israel. The material written about them and to them in the form of letters is included mostly in the Book of the Prophet Isaiah, and it has become among the most important Biblical material because it deals with a chosen people who are in serious trouble. Put very simply, they were afraid. afraid for their lives, but more than that, really. Afraid because the nation, the tradition, the culture, the religion was threatened. Afraid because their historic trust in a God who lives in man's history looked bankrupt for the moment. I'm always helped by that information. It was to these people, in this situation that the word came. And while I may have some difficulty tying into the image of a desert blossoming, I think I can identify with those "fearful of heart."

Fear - who doesn't know what it feels like to be afraid? The capacity for fear is so deeply built into the natural scheme of things that life would be impossible without it.

All animal life reacts to threat at a level that is instinctive. Startle a bird and it doesn't sit and analyze the situation, it flies away. Startle a man and he jumps, which is the instictive beginning of flight - away from the threat. Frighten a man and his hair stands on end, which is simply the anthropological remnant of the way our ancestors responded to a threat - namely by puffing up their hair to make themselves look larger and more ~~hostile~~ fierce. The apes still do it, of course. When fear grips a man, instinct takes over: the adrenalin flows, the eyes widen in order to see better, muscles tighten in order to react quicker, the heart beats faster preparing the body to respond. It's all rather amazing, and rather good.

Conscious fear, fear stemming from a threat we understand and can think about rationally, likewise is a positive factor. The fear of having an accident motivates us to drive carefully. Fear of disease motivates medical research: fear of floods motivates us to build dams; fear of a nuclear holocaust has certainly motivated the nations of the world to steer a more creative course in international relations. Fear can be a creative force.

But precisely because it is so much a part of our nature, and precisely because it is so very powerful, fear can be exploited, played upon. We can be manipulated by people who know how to get at this very vulnerable point. Think how many of the world's problems and tensions ~~depend on fear~~ are result of someone exploiting someone else's fear. Racism, for instance, has in it a strong element of fear of black people. White people in South Africa live with fear as a constant companion, and act it out politically in a system of total separation called Apartheid. Think how many of the important decisions our government has made since World War II have been based on the fear of Communism. I had the rare privilege last week of spending an afternoon with Father Joseph Ryan, a Jesuit priest who has spent the last 20 years in the Middle East. And his conclusion is that fear is the predominant issue in the continuing conflict between Israel and the Arabs. Arab fear of Israel's territorial intentions. Israel's fear of the Arab's overwhelming numerical superiority. Fear is a powerful factor in our life, and it can be very easily used by anyone who wishes to manipulate us.

But there is a deeper fear that is part of our lot. We do differ from the rest of the animal kingdom in that we can step outside oursleves and analyze our situation: we can ask, "Why am I here? What's life all about? What's going to happen to me?" We are

capable of playing that favorite parlor game called "What if?" until we are reduced to quivering nerves and hand wringing. Unfocused fear is anxiety, and it is particularly characteristic of twentieth century man. Edmund Steimle describes our situation like this:

"Here we are, set in a dangerous world with nothing much in the way of teeth or claws to defend ourselves or to secure food and shelter except for our wits and a remarkable thumb, with no ultimate control over life or death or what will happen to us in the future despite all our insurance policies and nest eggs and pension plans. We are understandably anxious!" (The Protestant Hour, 11/2J/71)

"No ultimate control over life or death or what will happen to us.." Our problem is that we know that about ourselves: we wake up at night sometimes knowing that about ourselves in a way that is terribly real and immediate. That's what anxiety is - that dim awareness that comes bursting through our consciousness on occasion that we are not finally in control, that all too easily something or someone can pull the rug out from under us.

Rollo May defines the difference between normal fear and anxiety in terms of being caught in the middle of a street with a car speeding toward you. Fear causes you to react: you see the car, instinct takes over and you jump out of the way. In anxiety you can't quite see the car, although you know it's coming, your vision blurs, you feel panicky and don't know which way to turn. Did you every have that most common of dreams? You are running from something -but your legs aren't getting the job jone, and you wake up in an agitated state. That's anxiety, milling around in your subconscious and finding a way to break into your thoughts. It's the feeling of being "caught" or "overwhelmed".

Well, I'd suggest that this is what the Jews in Babylon were experiencing: a sense of being caught and overwhelmed: and that this is what life does to you and me with cruel regularity. We worry a lot - about things we need to worry about like mortgage payments, and how the kids are going to get to college and the cost of living. But beneath it all is this sense of ultimate insecurity: that no matter what we do we are not ultimately safe.

One theologian calls it the "infinite void of insecurity" ~~(Gilkey, Naming the Whirlwind P. 310)~~ and maintains that most of our behavior is an acting out of this basic anxiety. In the middle ages men built fortress castles with walls thirteen feet thick to insure their security. In the twentieth century we seek that same safety in financial security.

Money in the bank, insurance policies, pension plans - there are the fortresses we give our lives to build. But it never quite works, because it's never quite enough, because the anxiety we are really acting out is unfocused and ultimate.

Landon Gilkey points out how this universal quest turns up in the most unlikely places in the most unlikely ways: "We are continually building defenses for our jobs and careers." he writes - "by all sorts of political and public relations maneuvers at the office, at the minister's convention, at the faculty meeting - in order to be secure for the future." (P.322) "Our infinite human hunger for wealth, prominence, and place is in large part an effort to amass power in some form or another so as to guard against the threat of fate, that unpredictable force of destiny that can snatch from our contingent hands these guards for our security."

Think of the Kennedy's. They have it all: wealth, power, prestige - as much security as is given to human kind to collect. And yet contingency - fate - tragedy - keeps coming and keeps proving that in this life there are no guarantees.

To be human is to experience fear. To be human is to live with anxiety - to act it out. To be human is to know that there is nothing we can do ultimately to insure our s security. That fact can rule us - or - we can chose to deal with it. Christian Faith confronts it head on. Way back in the days of the Old Testament the people of God were learning what it means to live with anxiety. ("to those of a fearful heart") the prophet wrote. "Fear not - be strong - behold your God." You may not feel safe, but you are.

Years later Jesus confronted the fearsand anxieties of his people. And the prescription he wrote for them was love and service and discipleship. ("Don't worry about yourself - think about your neighbor") he said, and it has been the Christian experience down through the centuries that loving service to others is the way we free ourselves from deadly anxiety.

But the best text of all was written by an old man before he died to the young Christian Churches in Asia Minor. He knew how people worried and fretted about the future. He didn't use the language of philosophy, but out of his long experience he knew the lonely awareness of ultimate insecurity. And so he plumbed the depth: "God is love, and he who abides in love abides in God and God abides in him" And then, "There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear."

That, it seems to me, is the best of all possible news. And that, it seems to me, is

the burden of the Church of Jesus Christ to carry to people who are afraid. "God is love - there is no fear in love." My greatest impatience, because of that, is reserved for Christianity that has not only forgotten that word, but has chosen to use and exploit fear for the purposes of manipulating people. Nothing, it seems to me, could be more contrary to the Good New of Jesus Christ than to use the psychological crowbar of fear to pry people into Church.

It's a favorite and respectable device, however, and having established the power of fear and our vulnerability to fear we need not underestimate its potency. This summer, our Scotland Parish was visited by a Mission Team - which for two weeks devoted its time to scaring children. And when our own children came home wondering if their hearts were black with sin, and if the devil was for real, and if they were going to hell if they died - our relationship with that particular endeavor came to a sudden halt. Religion that plays on fear - whether the easily exploited fears of little children, or the more sophisticated fears of adults exploited by your garden variety evangelist, just cannot be called Christian. In fact, it is moving in precisely the opposite direction.

God is love - there is no fear in love. The answer to fear and anxiety is not courage: some of us have a lot of that and some of us are unapologetic cowards. The antidote to fear - if Isaiah and John can be trusted - is love.

The Good News is that the infinite void of fate isn't a void at all. It is God, the source of all being - the all in all - and he is no wrathful judge. He, if our sources knew whereof they spoke is love - eternal, unending, compassionate love.

Perfect love - that is to say - God's love for you and me - casts out all fear. God loves us - no matter what happens. He loved his people facing the future in Babylon - he loved his son as he died on the cross - he loves the Kennedy's - he loves all of us with a magnificient, liberating love that has no limits.

That's why his people have not been afraid - ultimately of anything - even their own death. Because there is no fear in love - just joy and serenity and freedom.

Pope John XXIII had hold of that when he wrote in his diary -

"I am about to enter the thirty-second year of my life. The thought of the past makes me humble and ashamed; the thought of the present is consoling because mercy is still

being shown to me; the thought of the future encourages me in the hope of making up for lost time. How much future will there be? Perhaps a very short one. But long or short as it may be, O Lord, once more I tell you that it is all yours." (Alive Now, Fall '72, P. 22)

So - to us - of fearful hearts -
"Be strong - fear not
there is no fear in love" AMEN

Father, we are afraid of a lot of things: things we can control and things over which we have no power. Help us to keep it all in perspective, and to live our lives in that ultimate safety of your love. Through Jesus Christ our Lord. AMEN